

Career Path

Showcasing the world

by Dan Reeves



Christopher Ingles,
head of event and
catering services
AsiaWorld-Expo
Photo: Edde Ngan

In the demanding world of show business one must produce to advance. By this yardstick, Christopher Ingles, head of event and catering services, AsiaWorld-Expo, has excelled.

Since May 2005 Mr Ingles has been in charge of Hong Kong's biggest world-class exhibition and events centre, which includes a purpose-built indoor entertainment arena.

"I started out as an engineer working in the construction field and ended up working at Earls Court and Olympia, an international exhibition centre in London, first as the engineering manager, but then because I developed a reputation for solving problems, as an event planner," Mr Ingles explains.

All-star portfolio

A career in the field can be exciting, he notes. "I once hung two Audi sports cars from a glass ceiling above John McEnroe while he was playing tennis. I also had a professional boxer arrive on a flying carpet. You have to be creative but you must also have functional smarts," he says. "In my first job

we ran a beer fest followed immediately by a high fashion event and then a world-class horse-jumping event — some nightmare changes. I stayed with that company for three years and it was a formative experience."

Following this Mr Ingles moved to ExCeL London — an award winning centre where, after helping with the construction, he ran the first six months worth of exhibitions before being headhunted to work for an exhibition contracting company. In this new position he was in charge of a division and then worked his way up to become director of the company — the largest of its kind in the UK. "We worked with three of the largest exhibition centres in the UK providing services which ranged from stand building to rigging and audio visual services. Anything they required we produced," he says.

"You have to be able to cope with sudden changes to the plan and make quick decisions"

Mr Ingles once built a 10k square metre tent — the largest in Europe — to house a temporary swimming pool, complete with 15 giant fans to host an indoor wind surfing event. Other events hosted include concerts of Madonna, U2, Pavarotti, David Bowie; the British Open, the Ryder cup, the Formula One Grand Prix, Crufts dog show, an international boat show; music videos for Coldplay and Jamiroquai, and the TV shows Pop Idol and X Factor.

Best of both worlds

His career in Hong Kong has included major international events such as ITU Telecom World 2006 (held outside Geneva for the first time in its 33 year history), Asian Aerospace International Expo and Congress (to be held in coming September), and concerts by Oasis, Rain, Coldplay, The Black Eyed Peas, John Legend, Il Divo and Eric Clapton.

"I came to Hong Kong on my honeymoon and got to chatting with some people and then was asked if I

would come to work," Mr Ingles says. "The culture and the way people operate are different from Europe. I try to bring the best bits of Europe and combine them with China to make something even better," he says.

Mr Ingles' day starts early with emails on the 30-minute journey to work. If there is a show on, he goes straight down into the exhibition halls with the event planning manager and walks around making sure that things are as they should be. This is usually followed by meetings with service partners for catering, or if it's a concert the rigging and the technical matters, as well as planning future events.

"I am usually home by 7pm unless there is a concert in which case its one or two o'clock in the morning. I am on-site for every event. The day is never routine," he stresses. "We might get a chance to hear a number or two at a concert but really this is about business and we are more concerned with making sure things go right."

The normal routes for entry into the business are through hospitality and hotel management. "There are also event planning courses that you can take or you can come in doing an administrative role and slowly try to work your way through," Mr Ingles says. "You could conceivably become an event planner five years out from university and be planning your first small event within 18 months. A large show like ITU Telecom World 2006 took five planners to host. We have internships during the summer and that is a good way to find out if you like it. After that you need to try to get in on the ground level at an exhibition centre or a hotel because hotels are great for smaller events. Show flexibility and commitment in your work and send the signal that you really want to make it happen. You also have to remember it's not just about planning, you have to be able to cope with sudden changes to the plan and make quick decisions. That's essentially how I got ahead, by listening to what clients wanted and then stepping beyond this and giving them more."

Mr Ingles emphasises that the greatest thing about his job is seeing the results written on the faces of the people who attended the exhibitions and concerts. "We make people happy," he says, adding, "I believe that there are no problems just challenges and I try to keep things light-hearted and face everyone with a smile.

Taken from *Career Times* 6 July 2007, p. B20

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